

Tennessee Waltz

By

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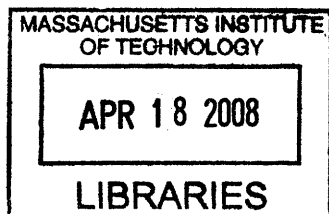
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ABSTRACT

Tennessee Waltz is a collection of short stories, set in Memphis, Tennessee, about the lives of three characters, a mother, daughter, and grandmother. These stories raise a series of questions: What is absolute? What is right and wrong? What are God and heaven? What is beauty? What is love?

Centered around the death of the grandfather, *Tennessee Waltz* addresses these questions and tells how these three women come to understand their mortality by learning to have faith in each other.

Table of Contents

Forward	4
Gramma's Dance	12
Tennessee Waltz	14
Rocking Chair	22
Playing God	26
Soil	32
The Absolute Truth	37
Sunday Morning	44

Forward

When I began writing *Tennessee Waltz*, I had known for a while that I wanted to write about mothers and daughters. I did not know what I wanted to say about them. But I knew something had to happen, otherwise there would not be much of a story. So I planted the death of the grandfather. Because of his death, Helen, Mary, and Alex, the grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter, become aware of their own mortality. They question life and faith.

When I first began writing these stories, I had no common thread. I was unsure what brought the characters together. Each story spoke on its own to me, but what was the bigger picture? What themes connected them? As I continued writing and exploring my characters, it became more clear to me what these characters wondered and worried about, and what they wanted out of life.

In a sense, *Tennessee Waltz* came together because of a very basic question. What happens after we die and if nothing happens, what justifies life? *Tennessee Waltz* is my attempt to show how people come to terms with not having an answer to this question.

It begins with *Gramma's Dance* – Alex's account of how her grandmother reacts to her grandfather's death. It is an appropriate opener, setting a tone and introducing the theme of *Tennessee Waltz* – the celebration of life after death. What is important is that Alex, even if she does not quite understand the dance, takes away something from her grandmother's behavior, and, ultimately, tries to imitate it.

Next is *Tennessee Waltz*, the story the collection is named after. We catch another glimpse of Helen, an opposite view from what we saw in *Gramma's Dance*.

We see her fear, her grief, her struggle to live, day by day, in a sometimes cruel, sometimes unjust world where right and wrong are simply a matter of opinion.

Rocking Chair is our first introduction to the grandfather, and Alex's first encounter with a scary world, a world apart from the security and protection of home and family. She is given something to fear and realizes where she feels most safe.

Playing God is a parallel to *Tennessee Waltz* – it is a glimpse of Mary's reaction to her father's death. We see her, on the surface, as somewhat shallow, somewhat superficial, a product of her fear. She wanders. Nothing external really happens in the story. We realize that there must be something more to her.

Soil is a summary of the themes of *Tennessee Waltz*. We see Alex with her grandparents, questioning her life, and their death. We see her going to church and questioning it, then coming into a sort of faith. Ultimately, we see her, at first unable to accept her grandfather's death (she does not even acknowledge that his dead body is *him*), eventually finding a sense of purpose in his life and his death because she recognizes that life, through the means of nature, continues. Though her grandfather is buried under a plot of land, the soil on his grave is fertile – a possibility for future life, and she imagines planting seeds and growing pumpkins on his grave.

The Absolute Truth is another, alternate glimpse of Mary, and the relationship she has with her daughter. Like Alex, she questions faith and church and comes to realize that her love for her daughter is the only faith she needs. In the face of death, Alex is Mary's means of survival. Though death, for some, might be considered absolute, a mother's love for her child is also, at least for Mary, absolute, and this is what is important.

Sunday Morning is the final word on *Tennessee Waltz*. It is a happy ending, an average day in this world, a Sunday morning, and Alex and Helen are eating breakfast and getting ready for church. It is simple and sweet. It ends with Alex walking out the door of her grandmother's home, with her grandmother right behind her – an indication (much like what we saw in *Gramma's Dance*) that no matter what Alex does in life, her grandmother will be right behind her. Alex can have faith in her grandmother – the mother of her mother – the creator of her.

Each story in *Tennessee Waltz* provides glimpses of these characters, who normally show restraint (a product of their society and the way they were brought up), somehow breaking the rules – little rules, some of them, personal rules, even just habits of life, but nonetheless, lines that can be difficult to cross. Helen learns how to dance, while Mary makes a more vain, more desperate decision to get a facelift. They are scared to break the rules, but, at the same time, compelled to do these things. In the face of death, they are doing everything they can to stay alive.

Helen and Alex go to church together, and Helen carries her Bible around, almost as if it protects her. In the end, what she actually latches on to are her hair curlers, because they represent her ordinary, everyday way of life. And they transform her, as she learns to celebrate this life.

When Alex's grandfather dies, she thinks of his body as lifeless, a nothing. If this is so, what was the point of his life? When she takes the pumpkin seeds and imagines growing them in the soil on his grave, her grandfather, in some way, becomes alive to her again.

Is there a heaven or an afterlife? Does it have to be the traditional heaven, or can it be something you make for yourself? Is heaven something actually represented by life?

Helen and Mary have each, in a way, continued, or "saved" their own lives by bearing their children. Is this a type of heaven? Are children and parents something to put your faith into? These women are faced with a death, and must come up with a way to justify it. Does having children justify it, because life is continuing?

My thesis explores the question of what is final, permanent, and absolute, which is brought to a head in *The Absolute Truth*. Is anything ever truly absolute? Is death absolute? For religious people, like Helen, death is not absolute because there is a heaven, or at least some form of an afterlife. Whether there is actually a heaven or not, it does not matter. Helen believes in a heaven and, therefore, there is a heaven, absolutely, and death is not absolute.

But Helen's daughter, Mary, and even her granddaughter, Alex, struggle with the concept of heaven. How do they come to understand their own life and death?

In answer to this, *Tennessee Waltz* presents another possible absolute: a mother's love for a child. Of course, there are always neglected children, and parents who do not believe they love their children, but in *Tennessee Waltz*, this love becomes absolute and, indeed, a type of heaven for the characters. It is Mary's, Alex's, even Helen's attempt to make sense of the grandfather's death and their own mortality, maybe not justifying it, but at least giving it meaning. Perhaps it is not enough for us to continue life for its own sake. Perhaps love – love of something

greater than ourselves – has to be involved. Perhaps our children are representative of that love. Perhaps that love is representative of God.

Fear of death is what moves these characters and what makes *Tennessee Waltz* a real story based on real people. How do these characters deal with their fear?

For some people, having a child is a way to keep living. It is not just a parent's mark on the world; it's not like writing a novel or winning a marathon. Having a child is like gambling for eternity, for an afterlife. There is a chance this child may survive to reproduce and that child may survive to reproduce. In the Bible so-and-so beget so-and-so beget so-and-so. It goes on for pages. What is surprising is that even the Bible, which some consider to be an instruction manual for getting into Heaven, also preaches a way to continue the worldly life, and is, in fact, a primer for life, telling us what we must do to keep it going, and what we should not do, or it will stop.

So where does the Tennessee Waltz come in? Tennessee is where country music, gospel music, and blues music – musics that began as a testament to faith – all came together. It is where the African-American slaves once picked cotton and sang songs to their God. Tennessee could, indeed, be considered a hub of Christian faith, and according to some faiths, it is sinful to dance. Then, when, where, and how did the Tennessee and the waltz merge? How did Tennessee, described as the buckle of the Bible Belt by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee in their play "Inherit the Wind," become the home of rock-and-roll, and hip-thrusting Elvis, home even to many churches where it's downright sinful not to dance?

If we dance - or don't dance - will we achieve heaven?

Helen is religious; she is Southern Baptist and has gone to the same fire and brimstone church all her life, the type of church that considers it sinful to dance. But she does dance. Especially after her husband's death, she learns how to cha cha, and waltz, and tango. She lusts after other men, too, and she relates their beauty, and her sinful longing, to something sacred, a type of heaven. One can imagine that Helen, after her husband dies, goes dancing many times. She goes on cruises and plays bridge, and, perhaps, gets a new boyfriend to dance with her. She dances to kill her fear of death and hell. Or is she celebrating life? Dancing – the very thing that might possibly land her in hell – is also what helps her overcome her fear. She is gambling with her death, but doing what is necessary for her life. If life is sacred, is it a sin to take pleasure in it?

Tennessee Waltz deals with this fear, the certainty of death, and, also, the process of dying. Aging is something else that might be considered absolute. Mary challenges this with her impulse to get a facelift. Is she trying to control her inevitable death?

If death is not beautiful, then why does Helen, 65 years old, seem more beautiful than her own daughter, Mary, who is thirty years younger? Helen has grown into herself, accepted, and, at the end of the story, even embraced her age. Does this make her more comfortable with death? If this is so, aging is no longer the degrees of death; it's no longer ugly or absolute. It is a beautiful process, a way of life, as simple and matter-of-fact as collecting photos for a photo album. It's rewards, just like any other endeavor, are commensurate with the effort and love you put into

it. It is enjoyable, something to feel proud of, and, in the end, there is something complete, filled with memories, beloved, no matter how dusty or wrinkled it gets.

So, then, is it good to age, bad to get a facelift? Good to cross your legs, but bad to get varicose veins? What is proper and what is not? What ensures heaven and what keeps you far from it?

Each character has her own set of rules and beliefs, her own rights and wrongs. Helen's beliefs are based on her religion, and the traditions of the society she has grown up in. Mary does what she does to break the rules her mother has taught her; her beliefs might be the exact reversal of her mother's. But Mary takes more from her mother than she thinks: she has severe restrictions for what she considers beautiful. Beauty, for Mary, the most complex, and most under-developed character thus far in *Tennessee Waltz*, is mostly superficial. Yet she cherishes her daughter. She realizes her love for Alex is possibly the truest form of beauty.

Alex, growing up, is just coming into her own set of beliefs. We see her going to church and not liking it. We see her questioning death outright, more than the other characters, who push it away and are, as a result, more haunted by it. Alex, more than her mother and grandmother, realizes the beauty of nature. She loves all things living or responsible for life – the ladybugs, the trees, plants, leaves, and soil. She loves her parents and grandparents.

The young are, at least in their minds, the farthest from death, the most naive about life. But sometimes it seems they love it the most. Certainly they celebrate it more openly, more freely. Only children, it seems, know how to enjoy life for its own sake. Is it the awareness and resulting fear of one's death that corrupts a

carefree, youthful life? Is it the knowledge of death that ages us and causes us to die? Alex, nine years old, has just learned of death, has just begun questioning it. She will lose her innocence during her walk through life as she becomes, first, like her mother, and then, like her grandmother.

Alex is naive and youthful. Mary is bitter and confused. Helen is fearful, but also, on the road to happiness. At least now she is content. Maybe she will one day gain another sense of innocence, long lost from her childhood, in the form of a blissful acceptance of death, and, therefore, an ability to enjoy life for its own sake once again.

It might seem that I have merely offered a series of unanswerable questions. Then again, these questions are everywhere in literature and they compel us to write stories. *Tennessee Waltz* is, very simply, a collection of stories, illustrations of the things we all wonder about in life. If they propose any sort of answer to life's insoluble problems, it is this: love and family. These are our refuge and our continuity.

Gramma's Dance

My grandmother had this archaic telephone - the old-fashioned, rotary kind that you dial with your fingers in the holes - when I was growing up. My parents once bought her one that was more modern, with buttons that you push, but she hated it. She got rid of it.

My grandmother could talk on the phone for hours, longer than I've ever seen any grown lady talk on the phone. When I was in middle school, I could talk on the phone for a long time - at most, an hour - but I always got tired of pressing the phone to my ear. My grandma, though, could jabber on for two hours. Sometimes three. About nothing, really. Places she had been. Gossip. What Margaret had said about Betty. Why Sue hadn't been to church on Sunday. Why some such church's preacher, so she'd heard, wasn't *really* a man of God.

She talked mostly about the church and mostly with her church friends, which I found odd. Wasn't the church a place for prayer? She told me she prayed for me every time I hugged her goodbye, but I'd never seen her do it. I imagined her kneeling by the bed, hands folded together - it didn't seem right. But talking on the phone. That I understood. She loved that phone. She loved to talk.

But when my grandfather died, she quit talking so much. She seemed fed up, angry, and surprisingly full of energy. A week later, my grandmother went to a senior citizen's dance at her church. My mom said it was brave of her, my grandma, to thrust herself out into the world like that. Alone. But my grandma had always been somewhat of a crazy cat. Friendly. Flirty with the guys. I once saw a picture of her, taken when she was about twenty. Long blond curls, a white bathing suit that covers

more than it wants to. All 40's style. She grins, a big, wide, happy grin, and her cheeks are full. I recognize my grandmother. And, sometimes, myself.

After my grandfather passed away, I think she just got sick of the sad stuff - dying, death. She'd had enough. So she buried him and went dancing.

My grandmother played dance music in the kitchen, on a small tape recorder that she plugged into the wall and propped up on a chair. She danced the waltz, the tango, the cha cha, hips bobbing side to side, feet scuffling along the tiled kitchen floor. Her hair was in her face. She danced: "one, two, cha cha cha," and "t-a-n-g-o." She showed me how, but I've forgotten.

Tennessee Waltz

After the funeral party had left, Helen looked around the room and shrugged. She had come to a stopping place, did not know what to do next. She sat down in Otto's old recliner and stared at the television screen, which, to her now seemed dead and cold. She looked at the vase on top of the TV and thought about rearranging the flowers and trashing the ones that were wilted and dying. Then she could dust. She wished there were still dishes left in the sink, but her daughter had done those before she left.

What is it, Helen wondered, that makes people feel they need to take care of you when your husband dies? It leaves me with nothing to do.

"I'll be back in an hour, mom," Mary had said, before she left with her husband, Greg, to go back home and get the kids to bed.

Helen had a full hour before she returned. And then what? Mary would spend the night. She would sit next to her Mom and they would watch TV. The news, most likely, because Helen always watched the news. And Mary would make her a sandwich for dinner out of the leftover turkey they had eaten for lunch. Real turkey, not lunchmeat, but the kind they always had at Thanksgiving dinner. Helen liked the dark meat, on two pieces of white bread, with a thin amount of mayonnaise, some mustard, and pickles. But she wasn't hungry now. She was exhausted. Bored. This room was nothing to her. It was hideous and still. It was hot and she started to sweat.

Everything was frozen. The television. Coffee table. Picture on the wall. The hand on the clock was the only thing moving. Repetitive. Mocking. Ticking. It

made her head hurt. She could turn on the television. The old record player. Any movement or sound and she'd feel alive again. Sad. She didn't want to be sad so she didn't turn anything on.

Even the news, she thought, would make me think of him.

She was hot. She had a headache. She was staring at a picture on the wall. A lady wearing a light blue dress. Fluffy. Ruffles. Lace. Helen wondered what wearing a dress like that might feel like. The girl had an umbrella that matched.

What for? Helen thought. Not practical. That umbrella would not keep out the rain. It would break. To shade her from the sun? She had seen women doing that. She once saw a short, fat Chinese lady walking down the street carrying an umbrella on a perfectly beautiful day. How sad, Helen thought, to cover from the sun like that.

It was too quiet now. Helen stood up and walked out of the room. In her bedroom, she grabbed her hair curlers, her Bible on the bedside table, and the music box Otto had given her when they were married. She shoved these into her purse. Pocket book, she had once called it, but, now, it seemed too big to be called that.

She drove slowly down Park Street, in her Ford Taurus, what her granddaughter, Alex, called an "old people's car." A car honked from behind and she jerked and slowed down. 30 miles an hour. She sang. *Mare-see-dotes and doe-see-dotes and little-lam-see-divey. A kiddie-ee-divey-doo. Wouldn't you?* She had taught that song to Alex, and had tried to explain what mares and does were, but now she didn't care. A car behind her honked, and she wanted to stop in the middle of the road and make them crash into her. She slowed down some more.

She turned into the lot at Overton Park and sat still in her car, the engine running. There was an exercise path and she watched a large woman run twice around, her breasts bouncing, painful-looking. There was a group of high school boys huddled together a few feet away, their hoods pulled over their heads. And in the very right corner of the park was a girl, in her twenties, walking, and wearing a light yellow skirt and sandals, despite the fall weather. No decent Southern lady would wear that after Labor Day, she thought. Still she wondered how it must feel to walk in the park with the cold, crisp air on her un-hosed legs. The grass slipping through her sandals.

Helen turned her car off and got out. The air was cold and she pulled her suit jacket tighter, held it close at her waist. The cold penetrated the jacket, got beneath her clothing layers and she was chilled. She shrugged her shoulders and shivered. She blew into the cold air. Her eyes were foggy. She leaned against the hood of her car and let the wind whip her ears red. It was a cold day for fall. Winter cold, almost. The weather was out of place, and Helen thought this might be a sign. Of what, she didn't know. The apocalypse? She thought of Jesus' second coming. The entire earth turning to war - good against evil, and then, suddenly exploding. She didn't know what or why she thought of this, but she grinned a little. She felt something wicked in the air and was surprised to find herself apathetic to it. She moved a piece of hair behind her ear. She coughed.

She couldn't go home. It was a scary, awful place. She felt trapped there. At least out here, she could breathe. The air was cold, but clean and fresh; not stale, the

smell of her house and death. She glanced at her hand - her fingertips. She'd need to get a manicure soon. Her cuticles were ragged. She'd been picking them.

She thought about Mary. She'd have come back by now. Probably panicking. She breathed in and out and breathed again. Then she remembered the dream she'd had. Last night. She had known she was dreaming, but couldn't wake herself up. In her dream, she had screamed and tried to get someone, anyone to wake her. She had screamed to wake herself, but couldn't. In her dream, she had jumped out of her bed and blindly run around the room screaming, because her eyes wouldn't open. Then, her eyes had opened, just barely, and she had seen the words on the newspaper on her desk, but she couldn't read them. She had been screaming for someone to wake her. She had screamed and screamed and tried to breathe, but the air had gotten caught in her throat, wouldn't go into her lungs.

In her dream, she had gasped. She had sweated. She couldn't breathe. She had been suffocating. Choking. Drowning. Then she had woken up.

She had sat up in her bed thanking the Lord she was alive, thanking God she could breathe. She had looked around her room - so still and silent. Her bed covers and pillows were neat and in place, no indication of a fitful night of sleep. But she had been screaming in her dream. She had been crying and jumping about. None of this - not a bit - had *actually* happened. No one had heard her scream. She thought how difficult, how nearly impossible it all was - this death, this life, and breathing. Just what does it take to penetrate a dream?

An old, red Chrysler, boxy and bulky, drove up and parked next to her. Helen wondered if the driver might be as ugly as the car. He got out - a tall, lean, nicely dressed man.

“Good day, Ma’am,” he said, nodding his head toward her.

“Mighty fine,” she said.

The man walked into the park, bent down and drank from a rusty water fountain. He lifted his head and stared at the sky. Helen admired his thick neck, his shoulders, his powerful back that looked more powerful as he lifted his arms and open palms to the sky, stretching.

Praise the Lord, Helen thought. What beauty.

She could breathe so easily - this park and this open sky. This cold air and beautiful man.

She thought he might be middle-aged, at least thirty-five. She wondered if he’d ever had children or been married. He didn’t wear a wedding ring. He could marry her, she thought, and realized the idea was ridiculous. He walked gracefully, with strength, light and powerful like a bird, the wind moving through his hair, as if he were part of the sky. He walked this way, almost flying, then disappeared into the sky and trees.

Two teenagers, hoods over their heads, hands in their pockets of their sweatshirts, walked toward her, yelling, cussing, and grinning at each other.

“Yeah, Man. Yeah!” one said, kicking over a garbage can.

The other took out a knife, starting carving letters into a park bench.

Helen should have looked the other way. She should have gotten into her car and left the park. She didn't. Her face grew hot, she clenched her fists. She walked over to the boys.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked, with all the control she had. "Are you going to pick that up?" she said, pointing to the trash can. "I'll call the police."

"What's it to you, grandma?" one of them said.

"I'm a taxpayer. This is public property."

"You gonna call the cops? Call 'em!" he said laughing.

"I don't see no phone!" the other said. "You got a phone in that bag? Grandma? Do you?"

"Now, you listen here," she said, louder now, her voice shrill, losing control. "Listen to me!"

"Whatcha gonna do grandma? Huh?" They were laughing.

"What's in the bag?" the other said. He was the bigger one - the one with the knife. He grinned, showing yellow teeth.

"Crazy old lady," he said. "Give me your purse!"

He lurched forward, grabbed her bag. The strap came roughly, scraping down her arm, got stuck at her wrist. She wrapped her fingers around it.

"Help!" Helen screamed, hoping the man in the trees would hear. "Help! Help!" The boy was pulling, tugging, ripping. She screamed in pain as the strap pulled tight around her hand, opened her fingers, let go. The purse fell to the ground. The boy picked it up. The man did not come.

“What you *got* in here?” he said, reaching in, and pulling out her bag of hair rollers. He threw them to the ground. “Hair rollers?” he said. “Crazy old lady.”

He pulled out the Bible and grinned. “Useless,” he said.

The other was laughing, spitting.

He pulled out her wallet and the jewelry box. “Now we’re gettin’ somewhere,” he said, pocketing the wallet and thrusting his hand in again, feeling around the bottom of her purse and frowning. “That it?” he asked. He spit on the ground. “That *it*? Hair rollers? Who the hell *are* you?”

But he held the music box gently in his left hand. Touched it with his right hand, felt the smooth, cold porcelain, noticed the pink painted flowers.

“My husband gave that to me. A wedding gift,” she said.

He opened it up. Music began - a tinkling sound of tiny chimes.

“It’s the Tennessee Waltz,” Helen said.

“*Old* music,” the boy said, shaking his head. Inside the box were two tiny, gold, wide-hooped earrings. “Nice,” he said, fingering them.

“*Real* nice,” the other agreed, reaching over to touch the box.

“Nice day, Ma’am,” the first boy said, slapping his friend’s hand away from the box.

Picking up the hair rollers, he slung them at his friend. “You can have this,” he said. He tucked the Bible under his arm. “Let’s go,” he said.

“The hair rollers,” Helen said. “They’re one-of-a-kind. Clairol. 1973. They don’t make them anymore. Please, can I have them back?”

The second boy looked down at the bag of rollers, a clear, gray bag, yellow-tinted with age. He frowned. He swung the bag hard at her, hit her in the arm so hard the bag burst and the rollers fell to the ground. Helen moaned and grabbed her arm.

“Hell yeah,” said the boy. “What the hell do I want with hair rollers?” he asked. “What the hell you give me those for anyway!” He laughed hard and spit on the ground.

“Crazy old lady,” the other said. They walked away.

She began picking up the rollers, stopped, closed her eyes, counted to ten, and opened them again. She watched the boys get into a car and drive away. She saw her Bible come flying out a window, land in the middle of the road, wide open, pages whipping about in the wind. She turned away as a truck drove over it.

“It’s not *useless*,” she whispered.

She thought now that all she wanted was a nice, long bath, and to read a newspaper. But she should call the police. She should call Mary. She got inside her car, sat down, her shoulders hunched, head hung. She rubbed her eyes hard with her fingers, stopped when she thought she might poke them out. The tune began to go through her head: “I was waltzing with my darling, to the Tennessee Waltz ...” She looked at the rollers, thanked God she still had *them*. She began to sing softly, “I was waltzing with my darling, to the Tennessee Waltz ...” Then she began to cry.

Rocking Chair

When I was little, my granddaddy and I would swing on the porch, on the green swing he had built. It was cracked and rusty and squeaked when it rocked. We used to sit there and watch the neighbors go by. He didn't say much. I did most of the talking. I'd ask him the kinds of questions little kids ask, like, "Why is the grass green?" and "When birds chirp, are they talking to each other? And, if so, why can't we understand?" I can't remember what he said. Maybe nothing. Maybe, "So's we can't hear what those birds are saying about us." But we just sat there rocking. He taught me how to whistle one day. "Get your tongue out of the way," he said. From then on, we rocked on the swing and whistled together.

And when I learned to read, I would read to him. "Double double toil and trouble" – my favorite from a collection of poems I had. I didn't know it was Shakespeare then. To me, it was magical, a witches' curse passed through the ages. I tried my best to talk in scary voices when I read it, the way my daddy did when he read to me at night. I let my imagination carry me away. Sometimes, I imagined I was a witch. Once, I thought, maybe my granddaddy and grandma were witches, and my parents had left me here by mistake. Maybe I'd be dinner that night.

"*You're* not a witch, are you?" I'd finally asked.

My granddad had laughed. "You're silly," he said. "Come on in to dinner. We're having fried chicken."

One day my granddaddy and I were sitting on the porch swing, rocking back and forth and I had the urge to get up and go ride my bicycle that my dad had brought when he dropped me off that morning. My grandma was inside cooking lunch - the

kitchen smelled like tomato, and I didn't want to be inside. That smell gave me a headache. And she couldn't come outside with me, to walk with me while I was on my bike around the block. So I asked granddaddy, who said, "No ma'am, I think I'll just sit right here and watch the birds." He knew a lot about birds - that the male birds were more colorful to attract the females.

I was scared and didn't want to go alone, but I didn't want to sit swinging anymore. So I said, "Will you watch me, and listen for me to yell?" I felt something bad might happen. I was always afraid that I'd be stolen away, because they'd warned us about that in school. "Don't take candy from strangers," was the slogan on all the posters in the hallway. My mom and I even had a secret word – *Snowflake*, the name of a white stuffed dog I slept with every night - and if she had to send someone to pick me up, she'd tell them that word so I would know it was okay. And if anybody offered me candy or a ride and they didn't know the secret word, I was to say "No, thank you," and walk away fast as I could.

But that day, I didn't want to sit next to my granddaddy swinging anymore, and even though all these worries were going through my head, my impatience got the best of me, so I grabbed my bike, the purple one I got for Christmas, kissed my granddaddy on the cheek, and said "Will you sit outside and wait for me?"

He said "of course," and I took off, a little scared, but certain this was what I had to do, or else die of boredom. And the awful smell in the house. When I rounded the first corner of the block, and caught the last sight of my granddaddy smiling and rocking in the swing, I saw a white truck, and some man inside with long hair. He grinned at me, and I kept riding.

It was fall and the leaves were changing colors. So along the way, I'd stop every so often and pick up a leaf that caught my eye - a red one, a yellow one - and put them in the basket on my handlebars. I rounded the second corner, and the white truck came by me, just as the wind sent a handful of those beautiful leaves swirling onto the sidewalk. I jumped from my bike and ran to pick them up. The white truck pulled into a drive just ahead of me to turn around.

The driver's long hair was stringy and greasy and he had a thick, dirty beard, and a scraggly sort of moustache. He popped his head out the window and grinned. He didn't have all his teeth. "Heya!" he called. I just stared. He put his snaggly teeth together and whistled through them. "Hubba! Hubba!" he said, and made a funny motion with his hand. I dropped my leaves and ran as fast as I could to my bike, jumped on, and pedalled away. As fast as I could. The white truck pulled out of the drive and followed me. My heart beat fast. I'd seen movies like this.

I wanted to stop and fall down and cry on the side of the road. Instead, I pedalled faster. I thought of my granddaddy waiting and I yelled for him. "Granddaddy!" I pedalled even faster, yelled even louder, and took that last, fast turn home. "Granddaddy!" I looked behind me: the white truck had missed the turn. I saw it driving away. But not fast enough for me. I thought I could hear that ugly, snaggle-toothed guy singing some country song. And laughing.

I pedalled faster right into granddaddy's yard and jumped off my bike so fast it fell over. "Granddaddy!" I yelled and ran to him, on that swing. He laughed. "Whatsa matter? Boogie man chasing you?"

I ran into the house, and that tomato smell didn't seem so bad anymore.

“It’s lunch time,” he said, following me inside. We sat down at the table. He unfolded his napkin across his lap and picked up his fork, then his knife. “Spaghetti. Yum!” he said to me. And then, “that puzzle you mother gave me is impossible. Never again! 1000 pieces!”

My grandma said, “He’s been working it on for a month, would you like to help?”

I nodded.

She said, “Did I ever tell you how you ate spaghetti when you were a baby girl? You put it in your mouth and said, ‘see here’s how to eat spaghetti’ and slurped it up, like you were sucking up a worm. Slurp!”

“You had tomato sauce all over your face,” granddaddy said, laughing. He took his napkin from his lap and, still laughing, wiped his mouth. “What a mess you were!” he said, and whistled one long, creepy note. I looked up, startled, and my heart started to pound. Was this my granddad? Was I in my grandma’s house? Or were these two truck men about to kidnap me? Two witches, dressed as my grandparents, fattening me up for their dinner? My face felt warm, the tomato smell suddenly awful again.

My granddad shoved a forkful of spaghetti into his mouth. He slurped loudly, winked at me and grinned. I was so happy to see all his teeth.

Playing God

It was bright outside and Mary pulled the curtains back to bring some light into the house. She put on some music – country-rock - and folded the clothes, then loaded the dishwasher.

It was a cold day, but warm inside the house. Mary was wearing her favorite gray sweatpants and long-sleeve t-shirt advertising a 5K Thanksgiving race, the Turkey Trot. She had placed third in her age group years ago.

Now, she thought how content she was, that she should take off work for the rest of the week, too. She even thought she might be just fine doing this exact thing for the rest of her life. There was no one in the house but the dogs, and cat, and plants. That was just the right amount of company, with the kids gone to school, her husband at work.

This contentment surprised her. Her father's funeral had only been yesterday and here she was, almost happy. But she knew it wouldn't last. Every emotion she felt was on a soaring level right now, and she could change from happy, to angry, to sad, in a nervous instant.

At this moment, though, she was comfortable. She was cozy. That was all she knew and that was all that mattered.

She was hungry. She went to the kitchen and, standing up, ate some turkey leftover from the funeral. She put on a glove and began dusting.

The CD finished playing. Mary didn't like the silence. She turned on the television, flipping the channels, and finally settling on the Home Shopping Network. She had once found it annoying. It had made her want to scream. But lately, it was

the only thing she could bear to watch. She wondered how she had once watched other television shows, how other people could watch them, emotionless. Comedies especially reminded her of a carefree life, maybe even the way her life had once been, as a teenager, when every fear or worry or bad thing that happened was made into a joke.

She wished she could live like a character on a sitcom, with a laughing track tagging her every movement and conversation, to remind her that all the bad things were really quite funny, that everything and anything was simply a joke.

On the Home Shopping Network, the women wore lots of makeup to cover their wrinkles. Mary looked closely at an older blonde woman selling emerald earrings, whose makeup quite visibly stopped at her hairline and in the middle of her neck. Mary could see that her real skin was yellow and saggy, with big pores. She smoothed her hand down her own cheek, and felt that her skin wasn't so tight or smooth as it had once been. It had lost some of its' shape, didn't sit so confidently around her eyes or jaw line anymore.

Mary turned the television off. In the silence, she sat on the coffee table and her back ached. She was still hungry.

He had been in her dream last night. Like an angel, he had come to her, talked with her. When she had woken, she remembered he was dead.

Was he? Had they really been sure?

Was it at all possible? Had they buried him alive?

Mary thought of her father, six feet below the surface of the cemetery ground, in some deep sleep, but, no, not dead. Not yet.

He might wake up and pure darkness, not know a thing. He'd scream and scratch the coffin lid and break his nails. He'd scream, but not a sound would be heard, his eyes wide, his mouth open, gasping and choking, like she'd seen him after his stroke. He'd suffocate, breathing in his own spit, and blood, and dust. He'd suck and suck the air and make no sound. Eventually he'd stop, give up, fall asleep again.

Surely, it was impossible. But, no, anything was possible. Mary shivered to think how many thousands, maybe millions of people had been buried alive. It had happened, sure. It was horrible. But it was just a joke, after all.

Mary changed into jeans, a white shirt, a red button-down sweater, and black boots. In the kitchen, she grabbed her purse, sunglasses, and a handful of cashews, which she ate in the car. She drove to the bookstore. She didn't know why. It had been an urge, a crazy thought, an impulse. This was the closest she could get, she thought.

She'd read about cosmetic surgery in magazines many times before, the actresses who had had it and those who hadn't. She'd seen on TV pictures of women immediately after the surgery - horrible, red-faced, grotesque images. The concept wasn't quite right. It was just like the way Mary felt about airplanes. Nothing that big should be able to fly through the air. She didn't care about technology or science. There were certain things that weren't supposed to happen. But these things fascinated her.

Mary had read in the newspaper that morning about a procedure used to isolate the sex of a baby before it was born. Before long, Mary realized, every parent would be able to decide the sexes of their own children.

How could they cut and mold the skin like that? Suck out stuff, and inject stuff?

She was uneasy about her fascination. This was something wrong. Sinful. She imagined this might be how a man might become addicted to pornography. Cosmetic surgery, too, became an addiction. Start with a nose job, move on to cheek, lip, and breast implants.

Mary was looking at the magazines, but, today, this wasn't enough. She looked around the store at the different sections, "Psychology," "Self-Help," "Diet and Fitness." She wondered how many people came to the bookstore to actually buy fiction.

She went to "Health and Medicine," and picked up several books. Her father had not yet been dead 72 hours. She felt strange, a little like the world was ending, or like it had just begun, here, in this bookstore, reading about facelifts, which, right now, seemed more important than anything else.

She was bouncing, physically bouncing, up and down on her toes, the way she'd seen runners do before a race. She was chewing her fingernail, the tip of her thumb stuck between her lips, her tongue resting on her thumbnail, as she walked through the aisle.

A man wearing glasses watched her from behind a book and she caught his eye suddenly, fleetingly, and then smiled, her cheeks flushed. She must look so silly. She smiled more, had to stop herself from laughing out loud. He'd been reading about marathons. When she'd walked past him, Mary turned her head to glance down at his bottom, firm and small, a runner's bottom, untouched by time and gravity.

Her hand went to her cheek. Why couldn't she? Nothing would stop her. It was like her other impulse buys - her pink cashmere sweater and diamond chandelier earrings - things she hadn't needed at all and should have felt guilty about buying. But they had made her feel good because she *could* buy them. They were pretty. She loved them passionately. Buying them had been like eating chocolate cake in a hot bath - a sinful pleasure.

She was sometimes afraid she'd go too far. She might buy more and more until these things meant nothing to her. One cashmere sweater was special, but two or three was a burden to wear, to clean, fold, and store when the season ends.

So far, she'd done just right, hadn't crossed the limit. Wearing her diamond earring and cashmere sweater made her smile. They made her confident.

She left the bookstore. In the car, she turned on the radio but forgot to turn the volume up. She drove over the speed breakers too quickly. A cup of water, days old, spilled into the cup-holder.

She drove down Poplar, not sure where she was going, but sure she'd find something eventually. She remembered talking with her friends that time about a place, a clinic. It was always in the news.

It was lunchtime, and as she drove, Mary saw women with their friends in and outside the restaurants. She saw no men.

These women were dressed in skirts and blouses, no coats, despite the cold weather. They wore shiny silver jewelry and had hair the same color blonde as Mary had. They wore red lipstick. Mary had sometimes wondered how these women hadn't noticed they all looked the same, but then, she herself found the look more

appealing than the women she'd seen on her trips outside the town, to bigger cities - women with no makeup whatsoever, not even a hint of essential lip gloss or blush. These women, too, shared a similar hair color, an untouched ashy brown, a lack of color, just a dark shadow around the face.

Did they even want to be pretty? They wore clothes in black and brown, never red. They wore white socks with dark shoes and carried sports bags constantly. They ate tuna out of the cans and shopped in the organic section of the grocery store. Mary wondered why anyone would ever want flies in their salads. The grocery store in Germantown didn't even have an organic section. She had once heard they smeared the fruit with mayonnaise and water to make it shiny.

Mary flipped through the stations on her radio, settled on the traffic report. There had been a wreck on Poplar, and they were suggesting alternate routes, but Mary wasn't listening. She was thinking about brown, rotten fruit. She touched her face to feel her wrinkles.

Soil

My granddad had a garden in his backyard where he grew tomatoes. He was all about tomatoes – how firm, how red, how ripe they were. He pressed his thumb to them gently to feel.

Proper tomatoes are beautiful fruits. I love how smooth, bright, and shiny they are. I love to press my thumb to them like he did. It's comforting. Like taking a deep breath. Therapeutic but fun, like playing with Silly Putty.

But to this day, you can't get me to eat a tomato, unless it's been squished to death, into ketchup, or salsa, or some other barely recognizable form. Maybe it's because of their beauty. But I eat apples, grapes, strawberries, and other fruits that could be considered as equally beautiful. Though I love the feel of a soft, ripe tomato on my cheek, I can't stand it all squishy in my mouth. I don't like the thought of a tomato, squished, like I don't like the thought of a cow, butchered. But I love cheeseburgers. I love cheeseburgers with ketchup.

My granddad would slice a tomato and put it on just about anything – sandwiches, spaghetti, a slice of cheese. My granddad, sweaty from the garden, would organize the tomatoes into two piles – good and bad.

He planted my grandmother a rose bush so she wouldn't feel left out of his gardening. On Sunday mornings, we'd pin the roses to our tops. Deep red roses with soft squishy petals that fell off and left stains wherever they fell. They were so deep red, almost black, and I have not since known a red as real.

One Sunday, my grandma, granddad, and I went to church, all dressed up as usual. In the car, they sang to Tennessee Ernie Ford in their scratchy, old people

voices. My grandma was a crackly soprano, my grandfather was a monotone tenor. I scratched at my stockings and complained at their singing.

Through Sunday School, I played with the rose that was pinned to the collar of my blue sailor dress and somewhere during the hour it fell off. This upset me. I went searching under the table, pulling and ripping my stockings on the rough carpet. They had been taking pictures of all the kids for the bulletin board in the church entry hall. When they finally found me on my hands and knees beneath the table, they gave me a small, black, fine-toothed comb and told me to straighten up.

In the corner, I saw Katie, my only real church friend, reciting the New Testament, which we had been told to memorize, to Miss Kathy. Katie got a gold cross necklace when she was all done, and I suddenly hated her, because I couldn't, by any means, recite the New Testament. It was impossible.

My hair was tangled and the fine-toothed comb wasn't working. It was, in fact, stuck in my hair, and when Miss Kathy saw this, she had to come over and work it out gently, holding my head and telling me to stand still and quit crying. Was this what Jesus would do? I told her I didn't think Jesus would ever be *combing* his hair. Did Jesus even know what a comb was?

Now, I realize this was quite a sacrilegious thing to say at Sunday School, especially when they were trying to take my picture for the church entry hall, to show all the church visitors, and members as well, what good, faithful children we were there at Union Avenue Baptist Church.

Miss Kathy just laughed at me, and straightened my hair. She had found my rose on a chair and helped me pin it back on my collar. She said, "Smile big and

bright!” and snapped my picture for the church bulletin board. In the picture, my eyes are pink from the crying.

I told my gramma that my learning the New Testament was impossible. I was too young – nine years old!

“Well, it starts ‘Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.’ Can you remember that?” she said.

I could. “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,” I said. After that, it was easy.

That year, my grandfather gave me a miniature rose plant for Christmas. It was beautiful, with tiny red blooms that I wanted to wear in my hair. The plant came in a plastic pot with holes in the bottom for the roots. We set it in a clear crystal bowl. My granddad taught me how to water it.

“When the soil gets dry, pour some water in the bowl,” he said, demonstrating. “That way the water goes straight to the roots. They drink it right up. Touch the soil. It should be nice and moist when it’s had enough. Does it have a name?”

“Maybe Rosy,” I said. I thought it was a witty name, and not an obvious one like someone else might think. My grandfather laughed.

“Good name,” he said. He warned me, though.

“Too much water, just like too little, will kill her.”

But this advice was too restricting for an impulsive, do-as-she-must nine year old. Whenever I saw my plant, I watered it, regardless of how moist the soil was. The leaves changed colors – bright reds and yellows – and I thought this was

completely natural, like leaves changing in autumn. I didn't realize what *autumn* really was until most of the leaves browned and fell off.

"Water-logged," my granddad said, as if I understood. He cleaned the soil of all the fallen dead stuff.

My plant died. I didn't believe it had, but, after all the leaves were gone, my parents finally convinced me to throw it away.

"We'll get you another one," they said. But I didn't want one. It had been so much work, all that watering.

Soon after, my granddad suffered a stroke, and, after months in the hospital, passed away. Some nice church-lady said that when I saw my granddad there, at the funeral, to think of him as nothing more than a car that didn't work any more. I didn't like this – my granddad was no car. But I suppose it helped. At the funeral, the body in the casket was *not* my grandfather. At least not anymore. It had been used, yes, it had once been him, but it wasn't any longer. Like an empty shell on the beach. I cried for my grandfather, but I had no feelings for this thing in the casket.

Suppose it had just been thrown away, like the plant. Would it have made a difference?

But once he'd been buried, a nice, clean plot in the Memphis Memorial Cemetery, he came alive to me, again, at least somewhat. When my mother and I brought flowers to his grave, I spoke nice things to him, that I missed him, that I loved him. I didn't like that he was buried so far below the soil. We were walking on him. He could no longer breathe. I wondered about those tomatoes he had once been

so proud of, had taken so much time with. How long had they been under the soil?

At Halloween, I carved a pumpkin with my father. We first scooped the insides, all the gooey seeds, out in handfuls, and threw them away. But I held on to a few of the seeds for myself.

“If I plant them, will they grow?” I asked my dad.

He smiled and shook his head. “Probably not,” he said. But he must have known that this made me sad. He lit a candle inside the Jack-O-Lantern. “Well, I guess anything’s possible,” he said.

I put those seeds in a jewelry box in my room. Next time we brought my granddad flowers, I’d plant those seeds on his grave. Perhaps they would grow. Like my dad said, anything was possible. Perhaps my grandfather himself was like a seed placed below that cemetery ground. Perhaps all the people buried there – the mothers and fathers, the grandparents, even the children – were like seeds. And the cemetery was a giant garden. One day, a tiny shoot would crack through my grandfather’s casket and push it’s way through the earth to the surface, and there, right on his grave, would be a granddad plant. I’d water it and take care of it, and know just what to do, because he taught me how.

The Absolute Truth

There was a pole lamp in the hotel my daughter and I were staying at in Hartford, the kind with the lampshade – really, translucent plastic – turned upside down, like a bowl or a basin. The lightbulb is placed in the middle for a bright, yet soft spreading of light. I love these kinds of lamps. I turned the one in our hotel on immediately after entering the room. It was then, through the plastic shade, I noticed a small dark shadow coming through where there should have been light. It was a dead bug trapped inside, no doubt fried to death. I stood on top of a chair and looked down inside the lamp.

It was a ladybug, quite obviously. The shell, anyway, of a ladybug, burnt to death by “soft” light. It was ashy yellow, nothing but crunchy dust that had held its’ original form. If anyone had noticed and scraped it out it would have fallen to pieces, to ashes, into the garbage can, no thoughts or words about it.

But I knew it was a ladybug, and I hated the sight of a dead ladybug. I couldn’t remember the last time I had seen one alive, flying, buzzing through the air, landing in the palm of my hand for me to blow gently on. Ladybugs, alive, are beautiful things. The kind of things that make you wonder how the world can be so beautiful, so perfect, to produce these small, round, winged, friendly beetles, and color them so bright, so red. And those spots!

A dead ladybug has no spots.

I once pulled the wings off a ladybug when I was six. My friends and I were trying to feed it to a frog we had caught in the backyard.

Fifteen years later, I am crying about it. I can't stop thinking about it.

Whenever I have free time, a moment to catch my breath, a break in a sentence - there! Some poor wingless ladybug, red papery shells on the ground beside her. She'll try to survive. She crawls on the ground, eats the grass, the leaves, and tries to escape her predators.

She's lost her significance, her beauty, her means of survival. This is how she dies.

She never knew to hate me, her killer.

I had to go to Hartford on business and decided to take my daughter, nine years old, with me. My mother objected. "I can take care of her. We'll go to the movies," she said. "The ladies at church would love to see her."

But I couldn't stand the thought of my daughter in that old-people church again, the church I grew up going to, the church my mother insisted on taking my daughter to the moment she was born. In that church, they talk about death and dying and never mention love without tempering it with the fires of hell. That preacher made heaven impossible to get into. Made hell seem like the very next train stop, the only end of the line, the absolute truth. Especially if you're a girl who keeps her legs uncrossed during church service. He blistered the boys for looking at the girls, thrashed the girls for wearing skirts, legs uncrossed, and tempting them to look during service. I told Alex the truth: Crossing legs does not get you into heaven, but it can cause varicose veins.

I thought I'd let Alex make her own decision about church, and heaven, and, sure enough, after nine years of going to church with her gramma, Alex decided she'd rather spend her Sunday mornings watching television, legs uncrossed.

I wanted to take Alex to Connecticut because she's never been anywhere before but Tennessee, Mississippi, and Florida. She's grown up thinking the world starts in Memphis and ends at the beach, and in between, there's just a series of highways leading from one trailer park to the next, and a couple of rest stops where the people talk country and serve orange juice.

In Hartford, there are tall buildings, people who talk well, and, most importantly, Mark Twain's house.

Alex had read the *Classics Illustrated* versions of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. She'd watched the cartoon versions, too, and had asked me what white-washing a fence mean. The "washing" was what confused her.

"It's not really washing," I had explained, "Just painting." And I could see it in her eyes: she wondered why *we* didn't have a white wooden fence. I sometimes wondered, too.

I'd heard from friends that Twain's house was really quite something to be seen, but when we got there, it looked just like any other expensive house, maybe a bit fancier.

"There's no fence," Alex said.

I explained, again, that this was *not* Sawyer's house we were seeing.

“Mark Twain wrote the book about Tom Sawyer,” I said. “And do you know, that’s not his real name? Samuel Clemens is his name. Mark Twain is his pen name.”

“Samuel Clemens is a nicer name,” she said.

“He rode on boats on the Mississippi River,” I said. “Probably inspiration for his books. A twain is a measurement. *Mark Twain* is what you say when you’re measuring how deep the river is. That’s where he got that name.”

She shrugged her shoulders. She hadn’t eaten her breakfast, either, and I knew she was bored. She had wanted to go to the mall today.

Inside, I paid \$30 and we joined the tour. The tour guide, a short man with friendly brown eyes, asked, “Does anyone know Mark Twain’s real name?”

“Samuel Clemens,” my daughter said, smugly. And then, softer, “*Everyone* knows that.”

Inside the house, the rooms were majestic, yet homey looking, brilliantly and comfortably furnished. There was a fireplace in every room, and the walls were faux-painted for amazing effects. One room looked framed in leather, another appeared to have gold drops encrusted into the walls.

We paused in the library: shelves upon shelves of neatly-placed, leather-bound classics. “Only some are originals,” the tour guide said, “But the mantle is still in place, still as it was.”

The mantle above the fireplace contained a series of oddly-placed, oddly-chosen objects: a framed picture of a Victorian lady, a fish sculpture, a porcelain bowl, several paintings on the wall, and more odd sculptures and knick-knacks.

“Every night, Mark Twain would sit in here with his family,” the tour guide said. “He would tell a story based on these objects. Starting in order, here, with this picture. He’d move through these objects, the paintings and things, each night, telling a different story. Some were fun and funny, but most were mysterious, some horrible, involving deaths and murders.”

Alex took it all in, I could tell, staring first at that fish, wondering how it might fit into a story by Twain. Some fisherman’s tale, perhaps. A murder on the river. And what about Tom and Huck?

One side of the library led into a conservatory – a sort of glassed-in porch turned into a tiny garden complete with a fountain. I wondered if the Clemens’ family had ever had a problem with bugs.

Alex’s eyes were wider now, and she was more awake as we moved into the dining room. She was taking it in, the plastic fruit and oysters that had been set out on the polished table. The shiny crystal glasses and chandeliers.

As we walked up the stairs, with the low railings, I looked down and noticed we had come up a great height, and I was afraid of heights. I moved to the outside of Alex, protecting her from a possible fall to her death, to the bottom floor. And we were only one floor above! How could Twain have ever felt safe with a house full of kids?

“Sometimes, the children would sneak out of bed, while Clemens entertained guests in the library,” the tour guide said. “They would lean up against this railing and listen to his stories.”

Lucky those railings had held their weight, I thought, imagining their falling, and landing, limp and splattered on the bottom floor. A bit of an exaggeration, I realized, but couldn't help the thought.

"Be careful," I whispered to Alex, and grabbed her shoulder too tightly when she, crossing in front of me, got too close to the edge.

The children's bedroom was typical, nothing extraordinary: a small, white rocking horse, dolls on the bed, a dog on a shelf that you pulled with a rope – a Christmas present, we were told.

Then, on the wall was a painting. Peculiar. It was ... a skeleton? A skull? Surely not.

But as I backed away, squinted my eyes, I couldn't help but see it. The hollowed eyes, the hollowed cheeks, absolutely the starved face of death.

Alex noticed it, too.

"Do you see it?" I asked.

"Yes ... it's sweet," she said. "Is it a picture from the *Secret Garden*? I just read that book," she told the tour guide.

She walked into the bathroom, to see the working toilet the tour guide had mentioned.

"It's a *skull*," I said, quietly to the tour guide.

"Walk closer," he said.

I did. The hollowed eyes of the skull became the faces of two children smiling at each other. They held hands, and that became the skull's nose. Their

bodies were the cheeks. Behind them was a fountain and a garden. They were having afternoon tea.

It was a vision of heaven, and, yet, a cold stare of death.

“How *morbid*,” I said.

“But he thought it was only natural and right,” the tour guide said, “to acknowledge death in the presence of his children. Ironically, he saw his own children die. First his young son, then, later, his daughter, when she was in her twenties.”

“Oh,” I said. My face flushed. “That’s so awful.” I walked into the bathroom, behind Alex, and, to avoid crying, forced myself to look at the toilet and bathtub, two things odd in such a house because they were both so regular.

Outside, after the tour, Alex admitted that she had enjoyed it.

“I’m hungry,” she said.

“Burgers?” I asked. She nodded, smiling, because that was her favorite food, and a perfect ending to, what she considered, a pleasant morning.

“Look!” she said, pointing at my sleeve.

I jerked. Whatever it was on my arm flew away.

“It was just a ladybug!” she said, laughing. “See! They’re all over,” she said, pointing into the trees.

Sure enough they were all over. Red spots on the leaves, in the trees, in the grass. They were flying, too, landing on me, landing on Alex, like tiny angels and as beautiful as a child’s smile. Alex, a ladybug on her cheek, had her arms spread wide. Like wings. Could there ever be a heaven so fine?

Sunday Morning

It's 6:30 a.m. I've just opened my eyes, and the pillow my face is buried in smells clean, like scented detergent. I hear bacon sizzling from the kitchen, and, when I lift my head, the smell is overwhelming. Getting up, moving a few steps, through the hall, the dining room. Into the kitchen. There's grandma stirring at the stove. A pot of oatmeal on the burner.

"Well, *goood* morning, ma' dear," she says to me. I yawn and sit at the wooden table. Out the window, I see the swing set my granddaddy built. There's only one swing there, and there's bird crap on the seat, like splattered white paint. A bird's nest with a cracked blue eggshell is on the window ledge. My grandma found it on the ground beneath the pecan tree.

She brings the oatmeal to the table, pours some in my bowl. She adds milk and sugar, stirs. Before taking my first bite, I blow on my spoonful, feel the heat already on my lips. Then, in my mouth, the oatmeal is thick and sweet. It moves, warmly through my throat. It's comfortable in the pit of my belly.

She sets a plate of bacon before me. A paper towel surrounds the bacon, wet with the grease it has soaked up. All life has been cooked out of it. It looks crisp, almost burnt, folded on top of itself, bent backwards uncomfortably. It snaps in my hand, leaves my finger tips shiny and smelling like smoke. In less than a minute, I've eaten three pieces.

Then some milk to wash it down, build strong bones. My grandma picks and chews on uneaten food as she clears the table, loads the sink, runs water over the

noisy pots and pans. I move to the den, lay on the floor a foot from the television.

Cartoons before church. I hear my grandmother loading the dishwasher.

Finally, sulkily, at my grandmother's insistence, I move to the bedroom.

Dress myself. White stockings. Green church dress with an ugly sailor's collar.

Huge bow around my waist. Shiny, black leather Mary Janes. They have little bows on the toes.

In the den again, I stand in the entryway, between the door and the coat closet.

There's a mirror there, and I play with the lights so I can see my reflection best. All

three are too bright. I look pale, like a ghost. It's best if I just flip the light in the

middle. The light directly over the mirror. Then, I can see some pink in my cheeks.

I pull my hair my back. Clasp it with a barette. Let it down. Pull it up again.

"Ready, ma' dear?" My grandmother, next to me. I huff, shrug my shoulders, and give up on my hair. "You look beautiful!" she cries. "*Beautiful!*" Groaning, I grab my coat from her. I head out the door. Gramma's at my heels.